



BAYT-AL-'ADL

BAYT-AL-'ADL (House of Justice), a Bahai administrative institution. In the Bahai faith all spiritual and administrative authority rests with institutions rather than individuals. These institutions exist in a hierarchy according to the area (local, national, and international) over which they hold jurisdiction. At present in the Bahai world, the institutions that exist at the local and national level are called Spiritual Assemblies (*mahfel-e rūḥānī*), but Shoghi Effendi has stated that these will eventually evolve into and be named Houses of Justice (World Order of *Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 5-7). At the international level, however, the name of the supreme authority in the Bahai world is the Universal House of Justice (*bayt-al-'adl-e a'zam*).

The House of Justice was first ordained in *al-Ketāb al-aqdas* (see [aqdas](#)) of *Bahā'-Allāh*. In this book and other writings of Bahā'-Allāh, there are many statements regarding the House of Justice, but it was left to Bahā'-Allāh's successors as leaders of the Bahai community to define the various levels of House of Justice and to determine which statements of Bahā'-Allāh relate to which level.

When copies of the *al-Ketāb al-aqdas* reached Iran, some of the Bahais in Tehran in 1294/1877 decided to implement the instructions and set up a House of Justice in that city. Later others were set up in other parts of Iran and in about 1900 in Chicago. But in 1902 'Abd-al-Bahā' changed this name lest the secular authorities in any country should think that an attempt was being made to set up an alternative judiciary or that any interference with the political or administrative affairs of the country was intended (*Bahá'i World*



Faith, p. 406). During 'Abd-al-Bahā's lifetime such names as House of Spirituality and Board of Counsel were current among the Bahais of the West and Majles-e Šūrā in the East. Later this was standardized to Maḥfel-e Rūḥānī. In his *Will and Testament* (p. 14; *Ganjīna-ye ḥodūd*, p. 214), 'Abd-al-Bahā' gave instructions for the setting up of special or secondary Houses of Justice (*bayt-e 'adl-e koṣūṣī*) which would be established in each country and would elect the members of the general or universal House of Justice (*bayt-e 'adl-e 'omūmī*). Shoghi Effendi interpreted this to mean that Houses of Justice would eventually be established at local, national, and international levels and be proceeded, from 1923 onward, with the formation of national Spiritual Assemblies (*maḥfel-e rūḥānī-e mellī*), which he identified with the secondary Houses of Justice. Predecessors to these national bodies had existed in some countries from the time of 'Abd-al-Bahā' with such names as the Bahai Temple Unity and the Central Spiritual Assembly (*maḥfel-e rūḥānī-e markazī*). Shoghi Effendi also established in 1951 a body called the International Bahai Council (Šūrā-ye bayn-al-melalī-e Bahā'ī) which he stated was a precursor of the Universal House of Justice. Following the death of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, the Hands of the Cause of God (*Ayādī-e Amr Allāh*, who had been designated "Chief Stewards of Bahaḍu'llah's embryonic World Order" (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Baha'i World*, p. 127), decided upon the election of the Universal House of Justice which was elected in 1963 by the members of all of the National Spiritual Assemblies. The Universal House of Justice adopted its constitution in 1972 (*Bahá'í World* 17, p. 287).

According to Bahā'-Allāh (*al-Ketāb al-aqdas*, quoted in *Local Spiritual Assemblies*, p. 3), Houses of Justice should be composed of nine persons, although if it exceeds that number it does not matter. 'Abd-al-Bahā' laid down that they should be elected bodies: the local Houses of Justice to be elected by all of the Bahais in an area, the national body through indirect election by delegates elected by the Bahais of each electoral area, and the Universal House of Justice to be elected by the national bodies.

Among the general functions of the Houses of Justice, as enunciated by Bahā'-Allāh, are the following: to promulgate the cause of God; to educate the souls of men; to preserve the law; to make the land prosperous; to administer social affairs; to educate the children; to take care of the old, the weak, and the ill who have fallen into poverty (*Ganjīna-ye ḥodūd*, p. 214).

The following statements of Bahā'-Allāh and 'Abd-al-Bahā' are considered to relate solely to the Universal House of Justice: (a) It is under the "care and



protection” of Bahā’-Allāh and the “shelter and unerring guidance” of the Bāb (*Will and Testament*, p. 11) and is “the source of all good and freed from all error” (*ibid.*, p. 14); (b) its membership is confined to men (*Selections*, p. 80); (c) it can legislate laws and ordinances to cover all areas that are not expressly laid down by Bahā’-Allāh and may also repeal laws enacted previously by the Universal House of Justice, but it cannot alter the laws laid down by Bahā’-Allāh (*Kalamāt-e ferdowsīya*, in *Majmū’a*, p. 37, tr. *Tablets*, p. 68; see also *Will and Testament*, pp. 14, 19-20); (d) it administers all religious endowments (*awqāf*: *al-Ketāb al-aqdas* quoted in *Ganjīna-ye ḥodūd*, p. 221); (e) it receives the religious tax of *Ḥoqūq Allāh* and has full authority over its expenditure (*Ganjīna-ye ḥodūd*, p. 107); (f) all matters of state (*omūr-e sīāsīya*) should be referred to this body (*Lawḥ-e bešārat* in *Majmū’a*, p. 14; tr. *Tablets*, p. 27); (g) it must promote the “lesser peace” (*Lawḥ-e donyā* in *Majmū’a*, p. 50; tr. *Tablets*, p. 89); (h) whosoever disobeys or opposes the House of Justice has disobeyed and opposed God (*Will and Testament*, p. 11).

The powers and duties of the Universal House of Justice, according to its constitution, may be summarized thus: ensuring the preservation of the sacred texts; protecting the Bahai faith from repression and persecution; propagation of the Bahai faith; expansion and consolidation of the Bahai administration; promoting spiritual qualities in the Bahai community and peace and amity among nations; enacting, abrogating, and changing according to the requirements of the time such laws and ordinances not expressly recorded in the sacred text; safeguarding the personal rights, freedom, and initiative of the individual; applying the Bahai principles and laws; developing the spiritual and administrative center of the Bahai faith in the Haifa-Acre (‘Akkā) area; guiding and coordinating Bahai activities throughout the world; receipt and administration of the funds and endowments entrusted to its care; adjudication and arbitration of disputes referred to it; pronouncing sanctions against violations of Bahai law (*Bahá’í World* 17, p. 286).

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For the constitution of the Universal House of Justice, see *Bahá’í World* 17,



1976-79, Haifa, 1981, pp. 285-92; also published separately Haifa, 1972. For the model declaration of trust and bylaws for a national and local Spiritual Assembly, see *ibid.*, pp. 337-45, 361-64 respectively. For quotations from Bahā'-Allāh, 'Abd-al-Bahā', Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, see the compilations: *Local Spiritual Assemblies, National Spiritual Assemblies, The Universal House of Justice*, nos. 1, 5, and 16 respectively of a series of compilations issued by the Universal House of Justice, Oakham, England, 1970, 1971, 1984.

For the history of the development of the administrative institutions of the Bahai faith, see R. Meḥrābkānī, "Maḥāfel-e šawr dar 'ahd-e jamāl-e aqdas-e Abhā," *Payām-e Bahā'ī* 28, February, 1982, pp. 9-11; 29, March, 1982, pp. 8-9; E. Braun, *From Strength to Strength*, Wilmette, 1978; P. Smith, "A Sociological Study of the Babi and Baha'i Religions," Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, England, pp. 291-95, 325-29, 338-47, 349-50.

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